

Virtuoso

THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE: Ideas, Power and Violence in America. By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Houghton Mifflin. 313 pp. \$5.95.

By Nicholas A. Samstag

Arthur Schlesinger, who appears to count himself among those who love ideas for their own sake, dithers around but never quite seems to come to grips with one rather nice idea: the relatively recent emergence of the academic as pundit.

By pundit I mean one who makes a name for himself, and often as not a fairly decent living as well, by holding forth on topics sufficiently in the public domain to render any attempt at questioning his credentials difficult. Culture was at one time the pundit's severely circumscribed realm, but with President Kennedy's attempt to welcome Mr. Schlesinger *et al.* into the body politic, the range has been extended by virtue of the scholars' marginal participation in policy making to cover just about anything that kicks its way into the headlines: violence, youth, foreign affairs, culture and politics, of course.

In a preposterously inflated discussion of "the intellectual and American society," the author, a historian, quite properly takes to task Noam Chomsky, a linguist, for foisting what Schlesinger considers unsound ideas and inaccurate intelligence on a naive public. Brilliance in linguistics does not guarantee authority in . . . well, everything. But Schlesinger finesses one consequence of his position: that his own field of expertise could be argued to have about as much relevance to contemporary public life as, say, a paleontologist's to present-day problems of ecology.

As a matter of fact, Schles-

inger's pieces on the postwar period, the origins of the Cold War and Vietnam, are effective if not particularly electrifying. In his element, he shifts the historical ponderosities about with all the élan of a chess virtuoso taking on a dozen challengers at once. The performance, though too short, is refreshing.

But it is only a respite. Otherwise, Schlesinger has written — no, he has compiled a number of previously published essays, modestly revised and carelessly updated, into a pompous, infu-

Nicholas A. Samstag writes editorials for the Providence Journal.

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riating book. It is a measure of the force of these collected essays that in all the 300-odd pages that are supposed to illumine the political, social and moral problems of these United States, Schlesinger has chosen to unleash his most heated attacks on two of his academic colleagues, Noam Chomsky and Herbert Marcuse. If these are the most dangerous or despicable men at large in America today, we are in pretty good shape.

A thorough documentation of what is wrong with this book would require space. I can only hint at the vistas of vacuity opened up by these warmed-over agonizing reappraisals:

On "violence as an American way of life": "Let us strike out against the concrete evils of our time. But let us not yield to that awful despair which dissolves all distinctions in thought and action and hurtles us on to the politics of apocalypse." "The resort to violence implies the failure of reason. This does not mean that violence is in every circumstance unreasonable; for there are problems which reason cannot solve." (Remember A. J. Liebling's skewering of the

"on the one hand this, on the other hand that" school of journalism?)

On those damned intellectuals again: "Ideas are the means by which a rational society comes to terms with a changing environment . . . Thinkers are most powerful when they think."

On youth and student rebellions: "The secret of protecting the intellectual life of the university in an age of undergraduate turbulence lies in avoiding situations that might drive the great majority of moderate students into an alliance with the tiny minority of extremists . . . Only by pursuing rational policies can administrations hope to isolate the extremists." And so on.

In the end, the saddest thing about this book is that it is so wasteful — of the genius of its historian author. If nothing else, Schlesinger's combination of specialty-plus-experience does give him an inside track on the very recent past denied to most of his would-be colleagues-in-punditry. He has used this advantage before to good effect. But he seems to have forgotten how, in his own elegant words, "Greed for power is one of the most squalid of human impulses, as pleasure in power is one of the most comic." ❧

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